Endowed Presbyterian Churches Conference

Worship Service

Friday, October 4, 1991, 8:30 a.m.

THE VALUE OF YOUR SOUL

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Mark 8:34-37

Some time ago I was part of a seminar in Washington which brought together a group of Presbyterian ministers and government officials who happened to be Presbyterians. There were twelve of us. We were in a van, waiting at the gate of the White House. A Secret Service man asked us for our driver's licenses in order to do a security check. Mine was lost; more accurately, it had been stolen. In any event, all I had on my person with my name on it was a church business card and the church credit card. I tried the business card. The Secret Service man disappeared into his office, returned with security badges, the kind you wear around your neck, with the licenses clipped on. When he came to me, he said, "Mr. Buchanan, may I talk with you?" I climbed out of the van amidst the laughter of my colleagues who were telling him that I was indeed a very real threat to national security. He asked if I didn't have anything which would simply assure them that I was who I claimed to be. Apparently I had lost more than my wallet and some money... my identity was at stake. So I pulled out the church American Express Card which does have my name on it. He seemed to be greatly relieved. I was approved. American Express got me in the White House when my word, the assurances of my distinguished colleagues and my employment at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago were brushed aside. I'm glad I had not left home without it.

Shortly thereafter, I encountered a John Updike short story entitled The Wallet. It is about Fulham, a retired broker, who "had assembled a nice life after thirty years of marriage,... handsome white house in the older suburbs."

Fulham spends his time managing his own investments and those of a favored few old clients in an upstairs room. Every morning he goes to his room with the Wall Street Journal, a second cup of decaffeinated coffee, to make phone calls, look out the window at his neatly manicured lawn, to survey and enjoy the world he has gained.

And then disaster strikes. One morning he can't find his wallet. Now, *if you are not a compulsive, obsessive person* you may not understand what this story is about. If you are, if you spend as much time as I do in a state of agitation because you can't find your keys or pen or glasses... you may find it funny and provocative. Fulham looks everywhere: under chairs, beds, he even goes through pockets of suits he hasn't worn for months. He goes a little berserk... His wallet was "a friendly adjunct to his person, a reminder, in its delicate pressure upon his left buttock, of his new stage of life - containing charge cards for Bay Bank, Brooks Brothers, Hertz, Visa, Amoco, American Express, Master Charge, The Harvard Co-op, Massachusetts General Hospital, plus his plasticized driver's license and cards signifying his membership in the Museum of Fine Arts, country club, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, social security and various sentimental mementos and pictures."

After several days of searching, Fulham announces to his wife that someone, obviously, has slipped into the house and stolen his wallet, punctuating his proclamation with obscenities.

His wife says: "I've never seen you like this."

"How am I?"

"You're wild."

"It was my wallet. Everything is in it. Everything. Without that wallet, I'm nothing."

Fulham finds his wallet. In fact, his grandson finds it folded up in a blanket on the couch. And Updike closes with him "squeezing the beloved bent book of leather between his two palms and feeling very grandpaternal, fragile, wiser and ready to die."

"Without that wallet, I'm nothing," Fulham said. Jesus said, "What shall it profit a person to gain the whole world and to forfeit his or her life?" He said that in the context of one of the most familiar, quoted and preached-on incidents in the New Testament. Everyone agrees that it is pivotal...

Jesus had just asked his disciples who they think he is. Peter has answered for them: "You are the Christ." Jesus has told them that he must suffer and die. Peter has argued with that, plainly not understanding who Jesus is. Jesus has rebuked Peter severely, and now this powerful sequence. "If anyone would come after me...deny self...take up a cross and follow. Whoever would save life will lose it. Whoever loses life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a person to gain the whole world and forfeit life...lose his or her soul?" It is a theme Mark will return to time and time again.

"Have we been so successful at inculcating a culture of economic individualism that we are losing our capacity for ethical citizenship?" asks a former vice-president and General Corporate Counsel of General Motors. [Can We Keep Our Glorious Market In Its Proper Place?, Elmer Johnson]

Matthew Fox says we have become compulsive consumers, walking garbage cans espousing the philosophy, "I buy, therefore, I am." [A Spirituality Called Compassion., p. 193]

"What does it profit?" Jesus asked.

I chuckled at Sam Keen's throw-away line that the world is divided between nations who suffer because their economies have collapsed and nations who suffer because their economies have succeeded. And I stopped chuckling when I realized that the newspaper on the same day I was reading Keen documented the truth of that observation. Page two told about unemployment and the utter lack of consumer goods because of the failed economic system in Eastern Europe. Page three told that the United States leads the free world in every measurable category of poverty...education, per cent of population hungry, health care, life expectancy. Page four told how hopeless it is to be young and ambitious in Yugoslavia. Page five told how the teen pregnancy rate in Illinois increased more this year than in any year in the past two decades. Page six told about children abandoned and starving in the Horn of Africa. Page seven told about the children who died in the most recent "drive-by" shooting in Chicago.

So maybe it is time for the culture, the nation, to ask about soul, who we are, the basic definitions of men and women which are operative here, about what we choose to be as a people.

Even religion, in the age of Narcissism, became intensely individualistic and personalized and consumer oriented. The most popular varieties continue to market personal salvation like soap powder and take a strict "hands off" policy about the great societal issues which confront us and which challenge us and make demands of us. The church has followed suit - or has wanted to, it seems. We Presbyterians are obsessed with our declining market, wringing our hands over the fact that numbers are down: that we aren't mainstream or mainline anymore: that we are not keeping pace with competing groups or with the secularism of our culture. We must be concerned, but sometimes our concern is expressed in ways that raise significant questions of theological integrity and identity and soul.

The Wall Street Journal published, and Roof and McKinney reprinted, a delightful article by a Kansas City advertising executive who, with tongue in cheek, has come up with a marketing plan for "revitalizing America's major religious faiths."

And it is a particularly relevant topic for our day. We are asking strong and tough and courageous questions in a renewed way these days. Perhaps the notoriety of the television preachers has embarrassed us into taking our religion more seriously, inspiring us to an inquiry as to what exactly this stuff we say we believe is all about. For sure, their financial indiscretions, while not as interesting as some of their other indiscretions, have forced all of us to look carefully at how we collect and manage and use the resources our people give us. Perhaps the challenge of the new biology, the environmental crisis, the continuing tragedy of urban deterioration... Rosemary Radford Reuther says that all the accumulated and neglected problems the world has ignored for centuries are demanding attention in the next decade. In any event, I am convinced that there is a new integrity and urgency of spirit alive in our culture. We want substantial religion. We want religion that can assume a place of respectable dialogue in the university. The most popular course at Harvard recently, is Harvey Cox's basic Christianity and Culture. We want a faith capable of conversation with the world about the great issues confronting us. We are embarrassed, resentful in fact, when our faith becomes a caricature, a reactionary bastion of worn-out and irrelevant moralisms.

We're ready for tough, courageous religion - which doesn't hide behind pious gestures and cliches.

For another thing, we now know that the "new narcissism," the whole gospel of happiness through materialism, acquisition, accumulation, "whoever dies with the most toys wins" is a lie. It doesn't work. It isn't true.

In the current bestseller, Fire in the Belly, about men, but not exclusively for men, Sam Keen talks about how we tie identity to work and income and consumerism. Our rites of passage include the games which prepare men for the battles of business and life...the first full-time job...and then getting a credit card. "The credit card," Keen says, "is for the modern male what killing prey was to a hunter... The Visa Card is an insignia of membership, a sign that the system trusts you to spend what you have not yet earned. In modern America going into debt is an important part of assuming the responsibilities of manhood and womanhood. Debt, the willingness to live beyond our means, binds us to the economic system that requires both surplus work and surplus consumption. The popular bumper sticker 'I owe, I owe, so off to work I go,' might well be the litany to express the commitment of the working man." [p. 51-53]

Sam Keen and other writers are joining a growing chorus of voices suggesting that our models are wrong and that if our soul, identity, is defined in economic terms alone - profits, consumerism, acquisitions, security - we are working with a very low and inadequate view of our humanity.

> "My strategy is to consolidate the various name brands, even the strong flagship brands like Southern Baptist into one identifiable. Exxon-like entity. The target audience here is Mom, Dad, Butch and Sis - solid suburban Americans who want a little God in their life and somewhere to go before brunch. After test- marketing various possibilities, I have decided upon the name Middle American Christian Church, or MacChurch, for ad purposes. I will not be sure of MacChurch's theology until focus groups are run, but I plan on following the promotional path blazed so successfully by Holiday Inn. In other words, this will be your 'no surprises' church. When Dad brings the family here, he can be sure that they will not be asked to speak in tongues, handle snakes or give money to the Sandanistas."

Now, no one is quite that bold about it, but there is among us the sense that if we were a little more market conscious, if we stopped asking people to give and started giving them what they want, we might be more successful. And there are plenty of success models to emulate.

However, just at the moment we begin to be convinced that the market strategy is correct, just when we inquire seriously of the super suburban churches booming with growth, just as we shift the weight of our theology to the supply side of the ledger, here comes Jesus - saying things like:

"If any comes after me and does not hate his own life - renounce all that he has...he cannot be a disciple..."

and

"What does it profit to gain the whole world and lost one's soul..."

and

"Whoever would save life will lose it and whoever would lose life for my sake will save it..."

and

"If one would come after me - deny self - take up a cross and follow..."

The psychiatrists and psychologists know that the more we give away the more we have. The more we hoard, save, protect and squeeze - the less we have and are. The issue is our own souls.

The heart of Christianity is the teaching of Jesus that in order to live you must love, and in order to love you must die. Put another way, the bold and radical proposal of the Gospel is that learning to love means learning to die. But in that process you gain something infinitely precious - your own soul.

If you are fortunate you already know that and are doing it. If you are blessed you have work to do; something for which you live, something or someone so important to you that you forget yourself and die a little or a lot. If you are alive fully - you are giving yourself to a child, a friend, your students, your parents, your patients, your clients, or a stranger, the helpless, the homeless, the sick, the prisoner. The very essence of Christianity - the essence of what he taught and lived and died expressing is just this: if you lose yourself for his sake, you will gain your soul.

When you give your life to him, or when you give it to others, which is always very close to giving your life to him - something mysterious and incredible and very good happens to you. You get something back. It's called your self - your life - your soul.

Jesus, the Christ, promised that one day.

All praise to him.

Amen.